

Strengthening Relationships

In this handout, you'll discover brain-based ways to improve communication and strengthen relationships.

Attachments bring us the greatest joys or the most painful sorrows.

Healthy relationships help you perform your best at work, school, or in any organization.

When relationships are stressed or break apart, people become unhappy and are vulnerable to acting out in unproductive ways.

A healthy brain helps you develop stronger relationships.

When your brain is healthy you can perceive others more accurately, have good control over your emotions, and act in healthy ways that bring people closer to you.

Your brain allows you to read social cues, listen, respond appropriately, deal with conflict, set appropriate boundaries, act inclusively, and be attentive in the moment of interactions.

Many relationships do not work because of brain misfires.

A brain with short circuits, whether yours or someone else's, often interrupts effective relationships.

If your brain doesn't function right, you are likely to have significant problems relating to the important people at work or school and in your life.

This has nothing to do with character, free will, or desire.

Targeted brain interventions can make all the difference between love and hate, effective problem solving, and prolonged litigation.

As you care for your brain, all of your relationships are likely to improve.

8 HABITS TO INCREASE YOUR RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

There are 8 brain-based habits clinically proven to increase your relationship skills. The acronym **RELATING** can help you remember them.

RESPONSIBILITY: Taking responsibility in relationships means continually asking yourself what you can do to make the relationship better. Also ask yourself what you are currently doing to make your relationships worse. **Do you:**



EMPATHY: Empathy is the human ability to feel what others feel. When it is healthy, we can experience the feelings of others. When the system works too hard, we can be too sensitive. How is your empathy? When negative behavior comes your way, ask yourself two questions:

1. Did I do anything to cause it?
2. What is going on with the other person?

LISTENING: Poor communication is at the core of many relationship problems. Active listening is a good technique that forces you to really hear and understand what the other person is saying. This technique involves repeating back what you understand the other person to be saying. In this way, you check with the sender whether the message you received is the one they intended to convey. Different phrases in using this technique might be:

1. "I heard you say... Am I right?"
2. "Did you mean to say...?"
3. "I'm not sure I understand what you said. Did you say...?"
4. "Did I understand you correctly? Are you saying that...?"

ASSERTIVENESS: Being assertive means you express your thoughts and feelings in a firm yet reasonable way, not allowing others to emotionally run over you, and not saying yes when that's not what you mean. Here are five simple rules to help you assert yourself in a healthy manner.

1. Do not give in to the anger of others just because it makes you uncomfortable.
2. Say what you mean and stick up for what you believe is right.
3. Maintain self-control.
4. Be firm and kind, if possible.
5. Be assertive only when it is necessary.

TIME: Relationships require actual, physical time. It doesn't have to be a lot of time, but it needs to be focused on the relationship. Be present when you are spending time with others at work or at home.

INQUIRING: When you're suffering in a relationship, it's very important to inquire into the thoughts that make you suffer. If you are fighting with your husband, for example, and you hear yourself thinking "he never listens to me," write that down. Then ask yourself if it is true.

NOTICING WHAT YOU LIKE MORE THAN WHAT YOU DON'T: This is one of the secrets to having great relationships. Noticing what you like encourages more of the behavior you like to happen. Focus on the behaviors that you like more than the behaviors you don't. It turns out there is also a great deal of science behind this concept:

- A marriage with five times more positive comments than negative ones is significantly less likely to result in divorce.
- A business team with five times more positive comments than negative ones is significantly more likely to make money.
- College students with three times more positive comments than negative ones are significantly more likely to have flourishing mental health.

GRACE AND FORGIVENESS: holding on to grudges and hurts, even if they are small, increases stress hormones that negatively impact our moods, immunity, and overall health. Giving grace and forgiveness can be hard, but when done properly, such actions can be powerfully healing. Psychologist Everett Worthington's REACH Method of forgiveness:

- **R**ecall the hurt—but this time recall it differently, without feeling victimized or holding a grudge. This moves you toward relating to the offense from the point of view of the offender.
- **E**mpathize—put yourself in the shoes of the person who hurt you and imagine what he/she might have been feeling.
- **A**ltruistic gift—give the gift of your forgiveness to the person who hurt you. Think about a time in your past when you wronged someone and that person forgave you and remember how much freer you felt. That is your gift.
- **C**ommit to the forgiveness that you experience—making a public statement of your forgiveness shapes your internal reality. Cement your feelings by engaging in a ritual like completing a forgiveness certificate, or writing a word symbolizing the offense in ink on your hand and then washing it off.
- **H**old on to the forgiveness—If or when you encounter the offender, you may feel anger and fear, and you may worry that you haven't really forgiven him/her. But that is just your body's response as a warning to be careful, not a lack of forgiveness.

REFLECTION

List 5 ways your relationships enhance or cause trouble at work, at school, or in life.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

List 3 brain problems that can impact relationships in a negative way.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List 3 habits that can improve your relationships.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Go back to the list of RELATING skills and note which of these skills you need to work on.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List 3 relationship challenges you've had, which RELATING skill was at play, and how you could have handled the situation better.

RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGE	RELATING SKILL	WHAT YOU COULD HAVE DONE BETTER

NEXT STEPS

Here are simple steps you can take now to help you on your journey to healthier relationships at work, at school, and in life. Put a checkmark in the box as you complete each activity.

- Use the 10 Communication Killers & 10 Communication Keys chart below. Take note of your own communication habits and how you can improve them to strengthen your relationships.
- Take responsibility. Think about what you can do today to make your relationships better.
- Practice active listening. In a conversation, repeat back what you understand the other person to be saying and ask, "Is that what you meant?" This can help avoid misunderstandings.
- Spend time strengthening a relationship. Reach out to a colleague or acquaintance and invite them to lunch or take a walking lunch together and get to know them better.
- Notice what you like. Make it a point to offer positive reinforcement rather than only criticizing what you don't like.
- Spread the word. Share what you've learned in with at least 2 other people to help them improve their relationships.

10 COMMUNICATION KILLERS & 10 COMMUNICATION KEYS

COMMUNICATION KILLERS	COMMUNICATION KEYS
Poor attitude. You expect the conversation to go nowhere and subsequently you don't even try to direct it in a positive way.	Good attitude. Assuming the other person wants the relationship to work as much as you do can set the mood for a positive outcome. I call this having "positive basic assumptions" about the relationship.
Unclear expectations and needs. Do you expect people to guess what you want or need? Most people are so busy it's hard for them to see the needs of other people. That doesn't make them good or bad.	Clear expectations and needs. State what you need clearly and in a positive way. But how you ask is important. You can demand and get hostile, you can ask in a meek manner and no one will take you seriously, or you can be firm yet kind and get what you need.
No reinforcing body language. When you fail to make eye contact or acknowledge the other person with facial or body gestures they begin to feel lost, alone, and unenthusiastic about continuing the conversation.	Positive reinforcing body language. Eye contact and physical acknowledgment are essential to good communication and help keep the other person engaged in the conversation.
Competing with distractions. Distractions frequently doom communication. Trying to initiate an important conversation with someone when they are preoccupied will leave you feeling frustrated.	Decrease distractions. If you want to have meaningful dialog, find a time when the other person is not busy or in a hurry to go somewhere and make sure you have their undivided attention.
Never asking for feedback. You might assume you are sending clear messages to the other person when, in fact, what they understand is completely different from what you meant.	Asking for feedback. It's important to know if you got your message across. A simple "Tell me what you understood I said" is often all that is needed to ensure the other person correctly understands you.
Kitchen sinking. This occurs in arguments when people feel backed into a corner and bring up unrelated issues from the past in order to protect themselves or intensify the disagreement.	Stay on track. During an important exchange or argument, be sure to stay focused on the issue at hand until it has been fully discussed.
Mind reading. You arbitrarily predict what another person is thinking and then react to that imagined information.	Ask what others are thinking. Before reacting to something you "believe" someone else is thinking, check it out by asking them.
Having to be right. When a person has to be right in a conversation there is no communication, only a debate. It destroys effective communication.	Be open to others' ideas. Make it a point to accept that other people may have viewpoints that are equally valid as or even more accurate than your own.
Sparring. Using put-downs or sarcasm or discounting someone else's ideas erodes meaningful dialogue and sets up distance in relationships.	Be respectful. Always treat people the way you would like to be treated and use constructive criticism to maintain a positive relationship.
Lack of monitoring and follow-up. When you give up asking for what you need, you often silently resent the other person, which subverts the whole relationship.	Be persistent. Monitor and follow up on your communication. Often it takes repeated efforts to get what you need. It's very important not to give up.